

Lexia: Undergraduate Journal in Writing, Rhetoric & Technical Communication

Volume IV

2015–2016

Piktochart: Basic Designs for Beginning Designers

Maya Chandler

James Madison University

Piktochart Basics

Piktochart is an online design program that primarily markets itself as an infographic creator. It can be run on any operating system, in any location with internet access and for which usage is never limited. The program also offers templates for three other genres of design: reports, banners, and presentations. For all four, users can build upon a provided template or can create from scratch.

Cost Options

Three versions of Piktochart are available to general users at various costs, plus two pricing options for education purposes and one for non-profits (see Table 1).

	Standard Package	Pro Package	Individual License (Education)	Class Subscription (Education)	Non-Profits
Cost	FREE	\$29/mo, \$290/yr	\$39.99/yr	\$120/4 mo	\$39.99/yr
Templates	~10	600+	600+	600+	600+
Unlimited Usage	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Image Uploads	20	200	200	200	200
Access to Graphics	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Export File Type	JPG, PNG	PDF	PDF	PDF	PDF
Watermark	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Online Publication	Public	Public, Shared, Private	Public, Shared, Private	Public, Shared, Private	Public, Shared, Private

Table 1 - Piktochart Cost Packages

With the Standard Package, Piktochart is completely free, and users can access a small number of templates (which are randomly selected each week), along with a blank template for each of the four design options. Users are also able to access the more than 4,000 graphics that are available and are able to upload 20 of their own images to enhance their designs. However, with this package, every finished design has the Piktochart watermark at the bottom of the page. Additionally, the standard package only allows for export to JPG or PNG files, which are lower resolution than PDF files,

and publication online (through Piktochart) can only be made public – the “private” and “shared” options are reserved for paid users.

The paid versions of Piktochart are either \$29 per month or \$290 per year (as chosen by the user), and both options grant access to the same set of privileges. With the Pro Package, users receive access to over 600 templates, with a new one provided each week. Users can also export designs to PDF files, which means a higher resolution than JPG or PNG files. The watermarks are removed, and users have the ability to upload 200 images instead of 20. Finally, users can publish designs privately or in a “shared” mode online, as well as publicly.

Students and non-profits are offered excellent deals for the service. For students who want to purchase the service for themselves, a year’s subscription is \$39.99, which is 87% less than the normal Pro Package. A class subscription, which covers 30 people for four months, costs \$120. Both allow students access to all of the features of the Pro Packages, as listed above. Non-profits are offered the same standard package or a year’s subscription to the Pro Package for \$39.99.

Using Piktochart

After the user chooses a template (or starts from scratch), a workspace appears with a toolbar at the left of the screen (see Figure 1).

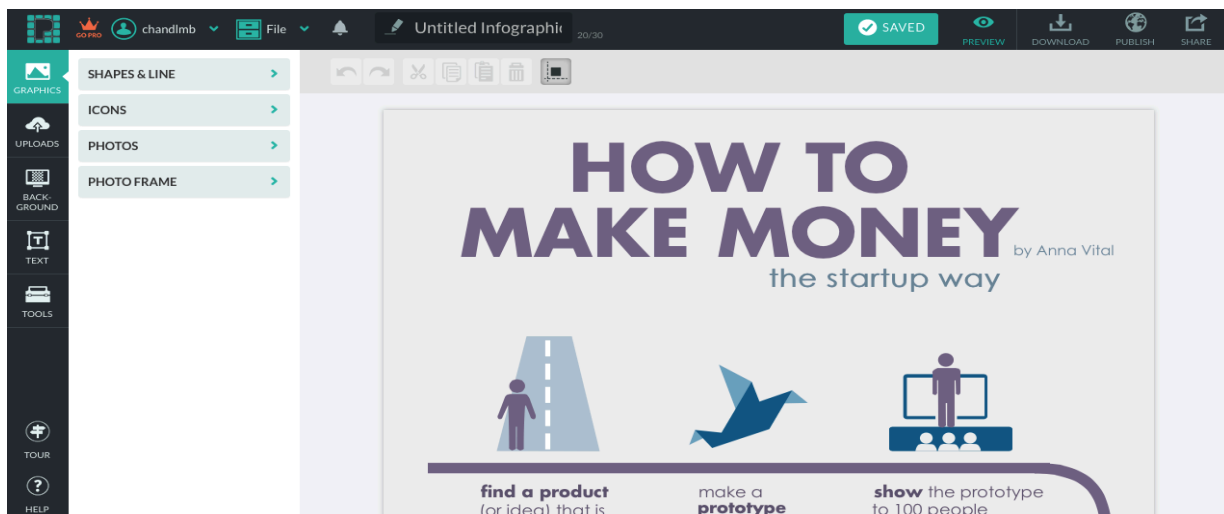


Figure 1 - Piktochart Workspace

The main toolbar, displayed on the left, offers five primary options: Graphics, Uploads, Background, Text, and Tools. The Graphics menu offers ways to insert shapes and a selection of photos; the Uploads menu is where users can import photographs; the Background tab offers solid or patterned background options; the Text tab allows text to be inserted; and the Tools menu shows the range of data representation offered in Piktochart (charts, maps, or videos). Each subsequently lists submenus or further options, which appear just to the right of the main menu icons (see Figure 2).

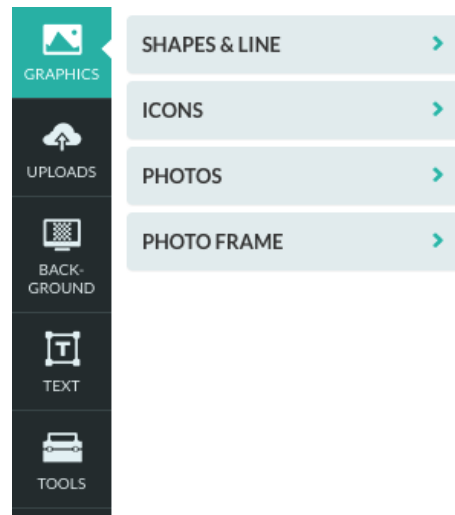


Figure 2 - Toolbar Displaying "Graphics" Submenu

The submenus expand upon the headers in a way that is easy to grasp and is fairly intuitive, because there are similar or identical options in almost every other kind of editing program available. Most users, with any level of knowledge, will recognize the options and be able to navigate through the options relatively quickly. Plus, after only spending a short amount of time in the Piktochart editor, it becomes clear where and how to find the tools one needs.

Under both the Graphics and the Text menus, Piktochart offers one of its most desirable elements – the “frames” options. These are small graphics with either text or photos that users can incorporate into a design. For example, a user might be making an infographic about a town or city. The photo frames allow him to put a photo of the place into, say, a circle with a text overlay – a modification that would otherwise require a lot more work. Frames also provide less confident designers with options that are already beautifully designed and with which it is hard to go wrong (see Figure 3).

TEXT FRAME



Figure 3 - Text Frame Examples

The workspace itself allows for a narrow view of the current project (depending upon the monitor size), which is broken up into “blocks.” All Piktochart templates and blanks are made up of horizontal sections that users can select and edit one at a time, including by making changes to the vertical size.

There are also a few rudimentary tools along the top of the workspace, such as Cut, Copy, Paste, and Undo/Redo. Additionally, an “align with other objects” button is offered to help objects snap together within the design (see Figure 4).

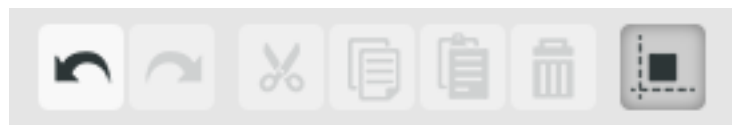


Figure 4 - Basic Toolbar (at top)

When objects, like a shape or text box, are dragged and placed into the workspace, they become editable as individual objects. New options appear that allow users to change color, opacity, and font, as well as to arrange objects (e.g., “send to back”) or make them into hyperlinks (see Figure 5).



Figure 5 - Extended Toolbar for Shapes (at top)

When selecting a color, Piktochart provides relatively few options as swatches, although it does offer a hex code box. If one were to select a color in a different program or elsewhere online, it would be possible to identify the hex code and have increased selectivity about colors (see Figure 6).



Figure 6 - Color Options

Inserting graphs is also very simple through the Tools menu. A separate interface appears in the workspace and looks very much like Microsoft Excel (see Figure 7). The users then input their data and can easily switch between graph types to determine which one best suits the information. Users can switch the colors here too, but the Helvetica font display is permanent.

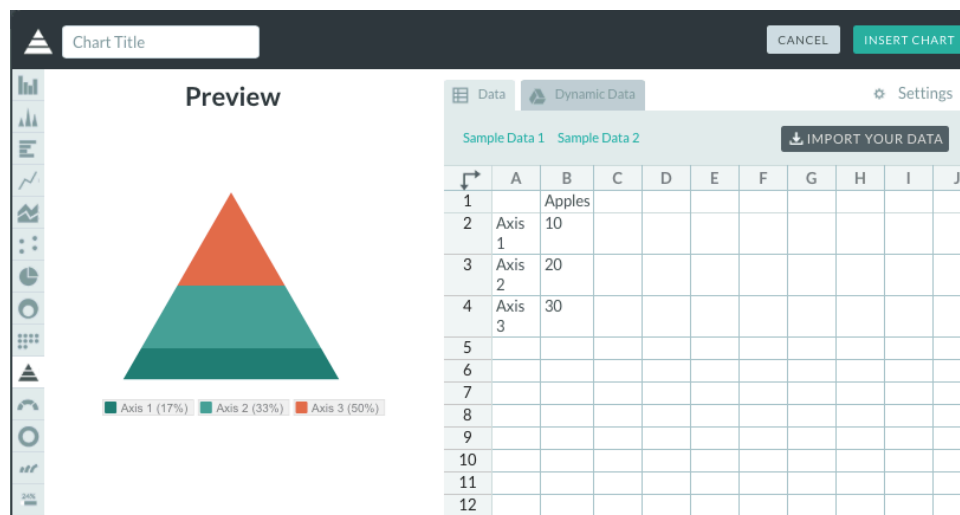


Figure 7 - Graph Interface

Public Opinion

Many reviews of Piktochart are positive – people like its ease of use and the way that it facilitates good design.

Reviewer Doug Kessler says that using Piktochart is a good way for “non-designers to create and share infographics.” He notes, though, that it is best suited for people or companies that “don’t have the time or budget to do a proper infographic” and are looking to “get something credible to market quickly” (Kessler).

Another reviewer says, “It’s good enough that I could use it in a pinch,” but that Piktochart is not going to take the place of more standard design programs (websinthe). His main complaints are about the way the program represents information. “I get the feeling,” he writes, “that the team behind Piktochart are designers and coders more so than data scientists or data visualizers” (websinthe). This is because the graphs available are aesthetically pleasing, but aren’t always the smartest for representing information. In the end, his opinion is similar to Kessler’s: “If you...need to be able to pump out infographics at hideously short notice like me, this could quite well become a part of your toolkit. It looks amazing and the final product catches the eye quite nicely” (websinthe).

Blogger and marketer Gina Yeagley presents a more favorable review. She mentions her ability to utilize programs like Piktochart for more than their intended purpose; she uses Piktochart for much more than just infographics. She has made party invitations, webinar recaps, and more traditional items like account overviews for clients in a business setting (see Figure 8).



Figure 8 - Party Invitation and Webinar Recap by Gina Yeagley

Yeagley too brings up the speed at which she is able to create “striking” designs, saying that she was able to make the webinar recap “while the webinar was in session” (Yeagley). In her opinion, Piktochart is the “no-brainer” choice when selecting an online design tool, and she praises it for its “user-friendly” interface and “customizable” properties (Yeagley).

My Experience

For my exploration of Piktochart, I made both a poster and a résumé. As the goal was to see how it compared to more standard programs, like InDesign or Microsoft Word, I wanted to test its capabilities as more than just an infographic-maker, or beyond the four provided options.

Study Abroad Poster

Although the Banner option provides poster-like templates, the purpose of these templates is still to disseminate lots of information – and many posters aren’t meant for this kind of setup (see Figure 9).

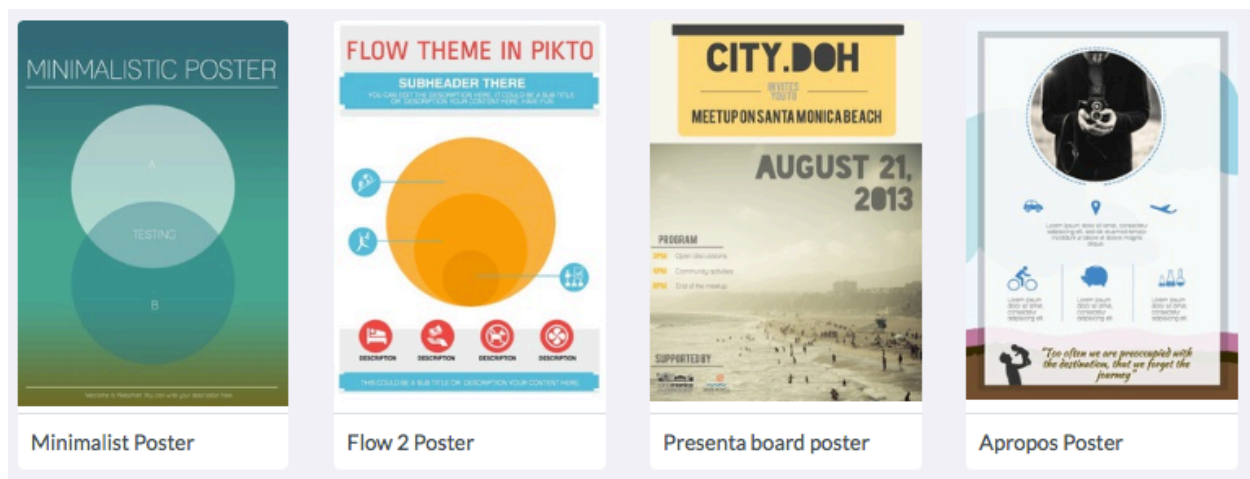


Figure 9 - Sample of Banner Templates

Posters are perhaps more common when advertising events, or, on a college campus, when advertising programs or classes. These do not lend themselves to the provided templates, so I opted for the blank template (as would be most common in programs like InDesign or MS Word).

I then created a poster advertising the JMU Study Abroad program. It features an exciting quote about travel and shows one of the locations to which students can travel: southern France. A banner, which reads “Study Abroad!” at the bottom of the page, alerts students to the purpose of the poster. The fine print sells the point a bit more and gives the URL that interested students can visit for more information. However, in designing the poster, I relied on the fact that most students in 2015 don’t even need the URL. They are more likely to see the poster and search for information on their own if they are interested. Therefore, my focus was more on grabbing the viewer’s attention than on discussing the minutia of the study abroad program (see Figure 10).



Figure 10 - Study Abroad Poster

This poster was one of the first documents I made in Piktochart, beyond my preliminary exploration to understand the interface. I, like the reviewers, found the process to be very quick, because I already had a vision for the poster in my head.

I did run into a few snags that are part of Piktochart’s learning curve. First of all, every textual element that I wanted to be formatted differently (font, size, color, etc.) had to appear in a different text box. This is easy enough to work around, but is frustrating at the beginning, especially because textboxes in the more common design programs allow for multiple format specifications within one box. The separate boxes weren’t a big problem, though, because the alignment guides helped me arrange each box as I wanted.

The only other problem was with regard to text frames, which I used to make the “Study Abroad!” banner at the bottom of the page. The problem here was that the color was unchangeable; that aspect is permanent beyond the few options that are sometimes provided, in the form of identical frames of different color (see Figure 11).



Figure 11 - Sample Text Frames; Same design, different color

In this case, I was also able to work around the issue, but it would become problematic in many other designs. For me, there happened to be a logical shape in a fitting color; however, in some instances, it is likely that the desired frame would not be available in a suitable color, meaning that users would have to design the color scheme around the available text box, which is very counterintuitive.

On the whole, though, the poster came out as I had wanted, and the text frame became something I would not have originally thought to include, thus enhancing my design. However, I felt that such a simple design (which is essentially one photograph, one rectangle, and some text) couldn’t possibly be representative of Piktochart’s true capacity for design.

Résumé Remake

After spending some time with Piktochart's templates in an effort to make a new résumé, I decided it might be more useful to recreate a version of my own résumé that I had built in Microsoft Word. This felt more logical than my original attempt to gear one of the templates toward a radically different purpose, which had proved to be exceedingly difficult. In general, the templates seemed to get me "stuck" much more often than starting from scratch did because it felt like I could change so little. While that is not true in reality, it felt very much like any changes just didn't make sense given the layout and they left me unhappy with the results (granted, the Pro Package does include a few résumé templates).

So I returned to my résumé from MS Word, which is fairly complex. It features text formatting and styles, various fonts, icons and symbols, as well as some layered shapes to create texture (see Figure 12).

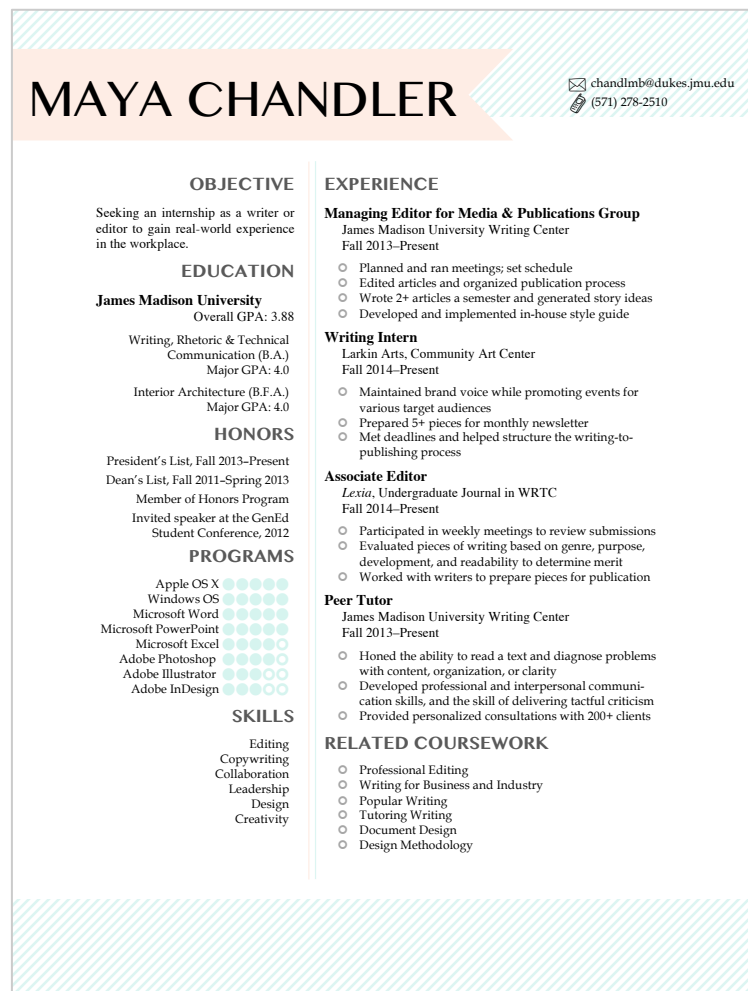


Figure 12 - Overview of Résumé, created in Microsoft Word

I set out to create an identical copy in Piktochart, while allowing myself some freedom to use Piktochart's features to their potential. My remake is slightly different for this reason, as well as for the fact that many of Microsoft Word's capabilities are simply not possible in Piktochart (see Figure 13).

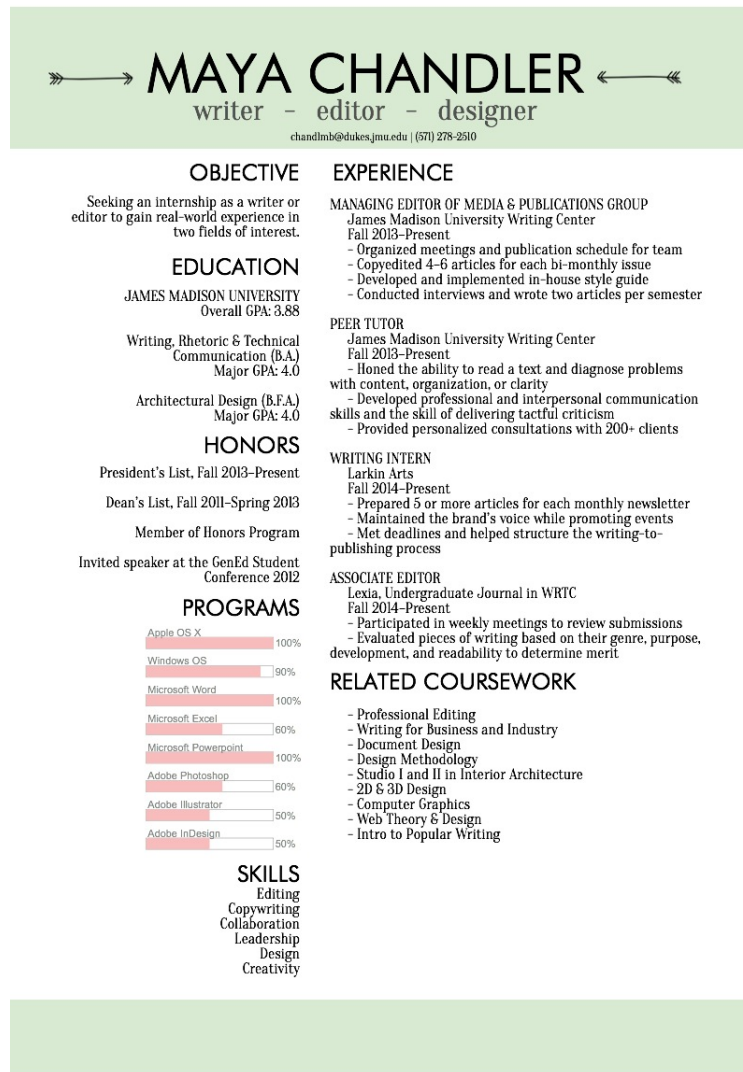


Figure 13 - Résumé Remake in Piktochart

One of the first snags I reached was that it is impossible to give shapes an infill pattern, which is how I achieved the mint stripes at the top and bottom of my original résumé. This is not automatically a problem if one designs with that in mind, but it is a limitation in creating textures, an oftentimes essential element of good graphic design.

In making my résumé, though, I began uncovering a multitude of problems with the text features that had not been apparent when making the poster. Primarily, the selection of fonts is very limited, and the ones available lend themselves much more to writing small amounts of information than to large. There are very few “normal” serif or sans serif fonts, and there are a great deal more “display” fonts (fonts that are so unique or showy that they become unreadable in large quantities). Because of this, it became a bit hard to find a pairing to suit the tone of my résumé. It is also impossible to import new fonts into Piktochart, as I had done for my Microsoft Word résumé. This is also very limiting, in terms of design, as typefaces are at the heart of a document’s tone and ability to communicate.

I also discovered that very few of the fonts have special formatting available, like Bold or Italic. This is limiting in terms of designing a document, although it might be less of a problem for more traditional pieces of graphic design, which could include less writing. For me, though, it was a problem that I worked around by using all caps. However, this was not ideal, and it did not appropriately provide visual hierarchy.

I also struggled with the lack of bulleted or numbered lists. Especially for a résumé, lists are crucial, and in Piktochart, they had to be spaced by hand, using a minus sign as a bullet point. Using the minus sign was a sacrifice I was willing to make, but structuring the list was much more problematic. As one types, the text appears in a different format than when the text is not being edited, which means that the spacing can look one way while typing, and then once the box is deselected, the formatting drastically changes (see bullet formatting in Figure 14).

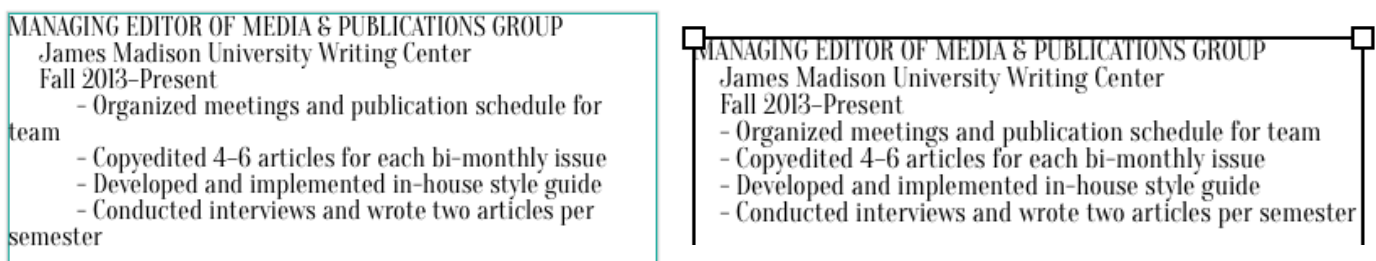


Figure 14 - Selected Text Box (left) vs. Deselected Text Box (right)

Finally, formatting the fonts proved to be more of a nuisance with the résumé than with the poster because of the separate text box issues. With relatively few text boxes in the poster, it wasn’t such a problem to space items. With a résumé, it became infinitely more challenging because both kerning and margins become a guessing game. One can only “eyeball” the spacing between headers and body text and hope that it is right. In

my Piktochart résumé, this did not end up being a massive problem; because this is a résumé, the edges are very ragged, and that disguised the potentially misaligned margins. In a document that calls for justified text or even paragraph formatting with ragged edges, this might become more noticeable.

The other large problem I ran into was in creating a graph to represent my skill sets. While making the graph was simple, the formatting issues rendered it almost impossible to use. This is because the font for Piktochart graphs is unchangeable. As with the photo frames, users would have to design around this typeface and use Helvetica throughout or sacrifice one of the more advanced features of Piktochart.

Color, overall, was also a slight issue. Without leaving Piktochart to determine a hex value of the perfect color, it was impossible to get the right shades of mint and peach that I had used in my first résumé. Of course, this could also be part of the learning curve of Piktochart and something that students would learn to work around. But in terms of replicating the features of other design programs, Piktochart falls very short in this department.

Conclusion

In my opinion, Piktochart is an acceptable platform in which students can begin exploring design, so long as they maintain a vertical orientation and don't need to write too much text. It also seems beneficial for students to use Piktochart if they do not feel confident about knowing what looks good. The availability of frames and templates lends itself best to those who might be new to design, or for professionals who need to create something quickly, as evidenced by the aforementioned reviews.

Piktochart might be best used in tandem with another design program; perhaps it would be a good place to start designing before moving on to Microsoft Word or Adobe InDesign because of its provided features. Students might benefit from the immediacy, or perhaps become inspired about how best to represent information by consulting the library of frames, templates (which are still visible, although unusable to free users), or graphs.

However, Piktochart is no replacement for InDesign or Word. In terms of what students outside of a graphic design program can use most successfully and efficiently, Microsoft Word is the obvious front-runner for me. To the level that students are able to learn in one semester, I feel that Word is almost identical to InDesign, and it provides far more features and flexibility than Piktochart does.

Moreover, for students who are not studying graphic design, designing text-based documents is a much more common scenario. Microsoft Word seems to be geared more toward designing these types of documents than does Piktochart. Furthermore, a familiarity with Word's text features would also be more applicable in a professional setting than would a familiarity with Piktochart.

Plus, with any design program, I believe it comes down to having a vision of what you want to make in order to make it possible. For both my poster and my résumé, I knew what I wanted to make before starting, and with both, I was able to arrive at a finished product that was very close to my original intentions. However, my task would have been much easier in Word, given the greater capabilities for formatting and arranging text.

Therefore, Piktochart is an acceptable solution for some design projects, and one that it doesn't hurt to be familiar with. However, it is too limited to create absolutely *any* kind of document and is far more suited for what it is meant to do – unlike Microsoft Word, which can create text-based, information-based, or graphics-based documents.

Works Cited

Kessler, Doug. "Using Piktochart: A Marketing Technology Review." *Velocity*. Velocity Partners Ltd. 1 Jun. 2012. Web. 13 Apr. 2015.

websinthe. "Initial review: Is Piktochart worth getting for building infographics?" *Websinthe*. 1 Jan. 2013. Web. 13 Apr. 2015.

Yeagley, Gina. "DIY Infographics: A Piktochart Review." *Kind of G*. 27 Mar. 2014. Web. 13 Apr. 2015.